

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF MISSOURI
EASTERN DIVISION**

JOSEPH MICHAEL DEVON ENGEL,

Plaintiff,

vs.

ERDCC and MODOC,

Defendants.

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No. 4:20-CV-1739-JMB

MEMORANDUM AND ORDER

This matter is before the Court upon the motion of plaintiff Joseph Michael Devon Engel (registration no. 1069055), an inmate at Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center, for leave to commence this action without prepayment of the required filing fee. ECF No. 4. For the reasons stated below, the Court finds plaintiff does not have sufficient funds to pay the entire filing fee and will assess an initial partial filing fee of \$1.00. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1). Furthermore, based upon a review of the complaint, the Court finds that the complaint should be dismissed pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B).

28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1)

Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1), a prisoner bringing a civil action *in forma pauperis* is required to pay the full amount of the filing fee. If the prisoner has insufficient funds in his or her prison account to pay the entire fee, the Court must assess and, when funds exist, collect an initial partial filing fee of 20 percent of the greater of (1) the average monthly deposits in the prisoner's account, or (2) the average monthly balance in the prisoner's account for the prior six-month period. After payment of the initial partial filing fee, the prisoner is required to make monthly payments of 20 percent of the preceding month's income credited to the prisoner's account. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(2). The agency having custody of the prisoner will forward these monthly

payments to the Clerk of Court each time the amount in the prisoner's account exceeds \$10, until the filing fee is fully paid. *Id.*

Plaintiff has not submitted a prison account statement. As a result, the Court will require plaintiff to pay an initial partial filing fee of \$1.00. *See Henderson v. Norris*, 129 F.3d 481, 484 (8th Cir. 1997) (when a prisoner is unable to provide the Court with a certified copy of his prison account statement, the Court should assess an amount "that is reasonable, based on whatever information the court has about the prisoner's finances."). If plaintiff is unable to pay the initial partial filing fee, he must submit a copy of his prison account statement in support of his claim.

28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)

Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B), the Court may dismiss a complaint filed *in forma pauperis* if, *inter alia*, it is frivolous, malicious, or fails to state a claim upon which relief can be granted. An action is frivolous if "it lacks an arguable basis in either law or in fact." *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 328 (1989). Dismissals on this ground should only be ordered when legal theories are "indisputably meritless," or when the claims rely on "clearly baseless" factual allegations. *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25, 31 (1992). "Clearly baseless" factual allegations include those that are "fanciful," "fantastic," and "delusional." *Id.* at 32-33 (quoting *Neitzke*, 490 U.S. at 325, 327). "As those words suggest, a finding of factual frivolousness is appropriate when the facts alleged rise to the level of the irrational or the wholly incredible, whether or not there are judicially noticeable facts available to contradict them." *Id.* at 33.

An action is malicious when it is undertaken for the purpose of harassing the named defendants rather than vindicating a cognizable right. *Spencer v. Rhodes*, 656 F. Supp. 458, 461-63 (E.D.N.C. 1987), *aff'd* 826 F.2d 1061 (4th Cir. 1987). An action can also be considered malicious if it is part of a longstanding pattern of abusive and repetitious lawsuits. *In re Tyler*, 839 F.2d 1290, 1293 (8th Cir. 1988) (per curiam). *See Cochran v. Morris*, 73 F.3d 1310, 1316 (4th Cir.

1996) (when determining whether an action is malicious, the Court need not consider only the complaint before it, but may consider the plaintiff's other litigious conduct).

To determine whether an action fails to state a claim upon which relief can be granted, the Court must engage in a two-step inquiry. First, the Court must identify the allegations in the complaint that are not entitled to the assumption of truth. *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 129 S. Ct. 1937, 1950-51 (2009). These include "legal conclusions" and "[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action [that are] supported by mere conclusory statements." *Id.* at 1949. Second, the Court must determine whether the complaint states a plausible claim for relief. *Id.* at 1950-51. This is a "context-specific task that requires the reviewing court to draw on its judicial experience and common sense." *Id.* at 1950. The plaintiff is required to plead facts that show more than the "mere possibility of misconduct." *Id.* The Court must review the factual allegations in the complaint "to determine if they plausibly suggest an entitlement to relief." *Id.* at 1951. When faced with alternative explanations for the alleged misconduct, the Court may exercise its judgment in determining whether plaintiff's proffered conclusion is the most plausible, or whether it is more likely that no misconduct occurred. *Id.* at 1950, 1951-52.

The Complaint

Plaintiff, who identifies himself as a sovereign citizen of Alaska, brings this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983 against the Eastern Reception Diagnostic and Correctional Center ("ERDCC") and the Missouri Department of Corrections ("MDOC"). In the "Statement of Claim" section of the Court-provided form complaint, plaintiff asserts the following, in its entirety:

I am a Sourvin [sic] Citiz[e]n and my 1st Adminment [sic] Right Keeps Being Violated by I amo [sic] Astru/Odinism/Catholicism Denying me my Religious Diet, Religious Martial [sic] and something down on my face sheet I'm not.

ECF No. 2 at 3. Plaintiff provides no additional facts or information in support of these claims.

In the “Injuries” section of the form complaint, plaintiff lists the following: “My Health, Freedom, Spritality [sic], Religion, Mind Raping, Mental, PTSD, Nightmar[e]s.” *Id.* at 4. For relief, plaintiff seeks “1 Trillion Dollars.” *Id.* at 5.

Discussion

A. Defendants ERDCC and MDOC

Plaintiff’s complaint is legally frivolous because the defendant entities cannot be sued under § 1983. Plaintiff has named both the ERDCC, a prison within the Department of Corrections, and the MDOC, a department of the State of Missouri, as defendants. Suing these defendants is the same as suing the State of Missouri itself. As such, these claims must be dismissed because a state is not a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 “person,” and because the State of Missouri is immune from suit.

“Section 1983 provides for an action against a ‘person’ for a violation, under color of law, of another’s civil rights.” *McLean v. Gordon*, 548 F.3d 613, 618 (8th Cir. 2008). *See also Deretich v. Office of Admin. Hearings*, 798 F.2d 1147, 1154 (8th Cir. 1986) (stating that “[§] 1983 provides a cause of action against persons only”). However, “neither a State nor its officials acting in their official capacity are ‘persons’ under § 1983.” *Will v. Michigan Dep’t of State Police*, 491 U.S. 58, 71 (1989). *See also Calzone v. Hawley*, 866 F.3d 866, 872 (8th Cir. 2017) (stating that a “State is not a person under § 1983”); and *Kruger v. Nebraska*, 820 F.3d 295, 301 (8th Cir. 2016) (stating that “a state is not a person for purposes of a claim for money damages under § 1983”).

Here, as noted above, plaintiff has sued both MDOC and the ERDCC, a state department and a state prison, respectively. Both claims are the same as a claim against the State of Missouri. However, in a claim for money damages, a state is not a “person” for purposes of 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Because plaintiff is missing an essential element under § 1983, the claims against MDOC and the ERDCC must be dismissed.

Moreover, “Sovereign immunity is the privilege of the sovereign not to be sued without its consent.” *Va. Office for Prot. & Advocacy v. Stewart*, 563 U.S. 247, 253 (2011). The Eleventh Amendment has been held to confer immunity on an un-consenting state from lawsuits brought in federal court by a state’s own citizens or the citizens of another state. *Edelman v. Jordan*, 415 U.S. 651, 662-63 (1974). *See also Webb v. City of Maplewood*, 889 F.3d 483, 485 (8th Cir. 2018) (“The Eleventh Amendment protects States and their arms and instrumentalities from suit in federal court”); *Dover Elevator Co. v. Ark. State Univ.*, 64 F.3d 442, 446 (8th Cir. 1995) (“The Eleventh Amendment bars private parties from suing a state in federal court”); and *Egerdahl v. Hibbing Cmty. Coll.*, 72 F.3d 615, 618-19 (8th Cir. 1995) (“Generally, in the absence of consent a suit in which the State or one of its agencies or departments is named as the defendant is proscribed by the Eleventh Amendment”). The Eleventh Amendment bars suit against a state or its agencies for any kind of relief, not merely monetary damages. *Monroe v. Arkansas State Univ.*, 495 F.3d 591, 594 (8th Cir. 2007) (stating that district court erred in allowing plaintiff to proceed against state university for injunctive relief, and remanding matter to district court for dismissal).

There are two “well-established exceptions” to the sovereign immunity provided by the Eleventh Amendment. *Barnes v. State of Missouri*, 960 F.2d 63, 64 (8th Cir. 1992). “The first exception to Eleventh Amendment immunity is where Congress has statutorily abrogated to such immunity by clear and unmistakable language.” *Id.* The second exception is when a state waives its immunity to suit in federal court. *Id.* at 65. A state will be found to have waived its immunity “only where stated by the most express language or by such overwhelming implications from the text as will leave no room for any other reasonable construction.” *Welch v. Tex. Dep’t of Highways & Pub. Transp.*, 483 U.S. 468, 473 (1987). Neither exception is applicable in this case.

The first exception is inapplicable because the Supreme Court has determined that § 1983 does not revoke a state’s Eleventh Amendment immunity from suit in federal court. *See Will*, 491

U.S. at 66 (“We cannot conclude that § 1983 was intended to disregard the well-established immunity of a State from being sued without its consent”); and *Quern v. Jordan*, 440 U.S. 332, 341 (1979) (“[W]e simply are unwilling to believe . . . that Congress intended by the general language of § 1983 to override the traditional sovereign immunity of the States”). The second exception is also inapplicable because the State of Missouri has not waived its sovereign immunity in this type of case. *See* Mo. Rev. Stat. 537.600 (explaining that sovereign immunity is in effect and providing exceptions).

Here, plaintiff has named MDOC and the ERDCC as defendants. As noted above, however, the Eleventh Amendment bars suit against a state or its agencies for both monetary and injunctive relief. Furthermore, no exceptions to sovereign immunity are present in this case. Therefore, for this reason as well, plaintiff’s claims against MDOC and the ERDCC must be dismissed.

B. First Amendment Free Exercise Claim

In addition to plaintiff’s failure to bring this action against appropriate defendants, his allegations fail to state a claim upon which relief can be granted.

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution provides, in relevant part, that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof[.]” U.S. Const. amend. I. Pursuant to the Free Exercise Clause, an individual has the right to believe and profess whatever religious doctrine he or she desires. *In re Kemp*, 894 F.3d 900, 907 (8th Cir. 2018). Moreover, the government may not compel religious belief, punish the expression of religious doctrines, impose special disabilities based on religious views or religious status, or lend its power to a particular side in controversies over religious authority or dogma. *Id.*

Under the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment, a plaintiff must first raise a question of fact regarding whether the prison has placed a substantial burden on his ability to practice his or her religion. *Patel v. U.S. Bureau of Prisons*, 515 F.3d 807, 813 (8th Cir. 2008). *See*

also Weir v. Nix, 114 F.3d 817, 820 (8th Cir. 1997) (stating that “[a]s an initial matter, a person claiming that a governmental policy or action violates his right to exercise his religion freely must establish that the action substantially burdens his sincerely held religious belief”). “To constitute a substantial burden, the government policy or actions must significantly inhibit or constrain conduct or expression that manifests some central tenet of a person's individual religious beliefs; must meaningfully curtail a person’s ability to express adherence to his or her faith; or must deny a person reasonable opportunities to engage in those activities that are fundamental to a person’s religion.” *Murphy v. Missouri Dep’t of Corrs.*, 372 F.3d 979, 988 (8th Cir. 2004).

Here, it appears plaintiff is alleging he is part of the Astru/Odinism/Catholicism religion, and he has been denied a religious diet and religious “martial.” The Court assumes plaintiff intended to write religious *materials*. Plaintiff provided no other facts. Such allegations are insufficient to show that plaintiff has been substantially burdened in practicing a sincerely held religious belief. His facts do not demonstrate how his religious diet manifests some central tenet of his beliefs; they do not show that not receiving his religious diet curtails his ability to express adherence to his faith; and they do not establish a denial of plaintiff's ability to reasonably engage in activities fundamental to his religion. Likewise, with regard to accessing religious materials, plaintiff does not provide the nature of those materials, and why they are necessary for him to practice his religion. Rather than supporting the proposition that his First Amendment right to exercise his religion has been violated, plaintiff relies on conclusory pleading that the Court is not required to accept as true. *See Wiles v. Capitol Indem. Corp.*, 280 F.3d 868, 870 (8th Cir. 2002) (“While the court must accept allegations of fact as true . . . the court is free to ignore legal conclusions, unsupported conclusions, unwarranted inferences and sweeping legal conclusions cast in the form of factual allegations”). Therefore, plaintiff's claim arising under the Free Exercise Clause must be dismissed.

C. Malicious Litigation

Finally, it appears this action is also subject to dismissal because it is malicious. *See Spencer v. Rhodes*, 656 F. Supp. 458, 461-63 (E.D.N.C. 1987), *aff'd* 826 F.2d 1061 (4th Cir. 1987) (an action is malicious when it is undertaken for the purpose of harassing the defendants rather than vindicating a cognizable right). Since filing this action, plaintiff has filed nearly 80 other complaints in this Court alleging that his civil rights have been violated by these defendants and other state and local entities and officials. Plaintiff submits the pleadings in bulk, and he specifies that he intends each set of pleadings to be docketed as an individual civil action. The nature of those pleadings and plaintiff's claims for damages are roughly the same as those in the instant action. It therefore appears that this action is part of an attempt to harass these defendants and others by bringing repetitious lawsuits, not a legitimate attempt to vindicate a cognizable right. *See Spencer*, 656 F. Supp. at 461-63; *see also In re Billy Roy Tyler*, 839 F.2d 1290 (8th Cir. 1988) (noting that an action is malicious when it is a part of a longstanding pattern of abusive and repetitious lawsuits). This action is subject to dismissal for this reason, as well.

Having considered plaintiff's abusive litigation practices and the manner in which he prepared the instant complaint, the supplemental document, and other civil complaints, the Court concludes that it would be futile to permit plaintiff leave to file an amended complaint in this action. The Court will therefore dismiss this action at this time pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2).

Plaintiff is cautioned to avoid the practice of repeatedly filing meritless lawsuits. First, a prisoner who has filed three or more actions or appeals that were dismissed for one of the reasons stated in 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2) is subject to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g), which limits his future ability to proceed *in forma pauperis*. Second, the practice of repeatedly filing meritless lawsuits can be interpreted as an abuse of the judicial process, which can result in court-imposed limitations on the ability to bring future lawsuits. This Court is “vested with the discretion to impose sanctions

upon a party under its inherent disciplinary power.” *Bass v. General Motors Corp.*, 150 F.3d 842, 851 (8th Cir. 1998) (citations omitted). This includes the discretion to craft and impose sanctions to deter litigants from engaging in “conduct which abuses the judicial process.” *Chambers v. NASCO, Inc.*, 501 U.S. 32, 43-45 (1991). *See Tyler*, 839 F.2d at 1292 (affirming the district court’s *sua sponte* determination that a litigant should be limited to filing one lawsuit per month pursuant to certain conditions precedent as a sanction for the litigant’s repeated abuse of the judicial process). These powers stem from “the control necessarily vested in courts to manage their own affairs so as to achieve the orderly and expeditious disposition of cases.” *Id.* (quoting *Link v. Wabash R. Co.*, 370 U.S. 626, 630-31 (1962)).

Accordingly,

IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that plaintiff’s motion to proceed *in forma pauperis* (ECF No. 4) is **GRANTED**.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that plaintiff’s motion to appoint counsel (ECF No. 3) is **DENIED as moot**.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that the plaintiff shall pay an initial filing fee of \$1.00 within thirty (30) days of the date of this Order. Plaintiff is instructed to make his remittance payable to “Clerk, United States District Court,” and to include upon it: (1) his name; (2) his prison registration number; (3) the case number; and (4) that the remittance is for an original proceeding.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that this action is **DISMISSED** pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B). A separate order of dismissal will be entered herewith.

Dated this 31st day of December, 2020.

/s/ Jean C. Hamilton
JEAN C. HAMILTON
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE